

[Dunnell #8]

STATE Massachusetts

NAME OF WORKER Robert Wilder

ADDRESS Northfield, Massachusetts

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SUBJECT Living Lore

NAME OF INFORMANT G. O. Dunnell

ADDRESS Northfield, Massachusetts

Name Robert Wilder

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Assignment Northfield

Topic G. O. Dunnell, Hay, Grain and Feed Man Paper 8

Mr. Dunnell, hatless, with a collarless white shirt, somewhat crumpled, trousers that looked as if their wearer might have been at a crap game, supported by very visible suspenders, hair well slicked down, but skin an unnatural white, was out for a walk to enjoy a butt of the cigar a salesman had given him, in the cool of the evening.

“Thought I'd drop in on yer. An' before I forget it, let me ask yer how many feet they is in a link. A surveyor's link I mean. Only about eight inches? Sho, I thought they was more than that. I'm measuring the front of my lot. It tells in the deed how many links they is. Maybe I

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need chains, too? No, I don't think so. The deed don't say nothin' about chains. It jes' says links. I'm measuring the front of my lot 'cause I want to be sure that I don't own that tree that got thrown down by the hurricane. I don't think I do. But my son Leon says I do. And I'm goin' to find out.

"Yer see, when they set that tree up, they drove that steam shovel of theirs right across my lawn and left a couple ruts there about a foot deep. Now, it's one thing if I own the tree — though I didn't ask 'em to do it, nor they didn't ask me, nor any of us, if we wanted it done. And it's quite another thing if that tree belongs on Abbott's land. Jes' why did they drive across my lawn to fix his tree? Why didn't they drive across his lawn. And put the ruts in that? Oh well, I don't really care, but we got to talking about it so I thought I'd find out whose tree it was.

"I don't care, because the state filled in the ruts. And they're going to plant grass seed, if they get around to it before winter sets in.

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Here 'tis the end of May and they ain't got around to it yet. I got quite a crop of things growing in those ruts now, waiting for the state fellers to come around. I didn't plant none of it. But it grew just the same. I got grass. But it's that yellor grass that grows in corn-fields. And I got pig weed and dandy lion, and lots of little elms and maples about four inches high. I'll have to mow the mess if they don't hurry up.

"I don't think I'll have to mow my garden this year. I got a pretty good start. My peas are up, and so are my potatoes. I'm the only one that raises peas around here, am I? Well, I found out sunthin'. I used to use a lot of fertilizer — jest as these other fellers do — before I planted. And the vines would come up two three inches high, turn yellor and die. I figgered I was burnin' up the roots. So now I wait 'til the plants is two three inches high, then I put fertilizer around them careful. Yer mustn't git none of it on the plants, you know. Keep it a couple of inches away. I do that, then I put in the brush for 'em to grow up one. And I get a

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good crop. 'taint nothing I read anywhere, nor what anybody told me. I just found it out for myself. Beats all what you can do if you use your head once in a while.

“You say snakes are good in a garden? I've heard that. But my wife wouldn't go anywhere near the garden if she knew they was a snake there. And if they's a snake anywheres around, she'll see it. And I ain't one to keep her from pullin' weeds, damn them.

“I ain't afraid of snakes. They can't hurt you none — 'cept, maybe, the rattler. They are a lot more anxious to get out of your way 3 than you are to get out of theirs. And, unless you got 'em cornered, somehow, they won't even strike at yer.

“You know, they's a lot of people that won't go on that hill back of the cemetery. Afraid to. Afraid of the snakes. When the first warm days of spring come, don't no one want to go near that cemetery if they are afraid of snakes. They are mostly the striped kind, but they crawl out of their holes and sun 'emselves on the tombstones — stretch 'emselves out on the rocks the stones are set in. They say they killed over sixty there getting ready for Memorial Day.

“George Slate seen one there that warn't no striped one. He didn't stop to find out what color it was, or what pattern it had on it. I don't know where a critter like he seen could a come from — less it was from a circus. And George is a truthful man.

“George was digging a grave. Guess it was for that woman that used to work here one time. She went down to Boston, and got to be the boss in a big store. Then she come here without telling nobody — walked from the East Northfield station and jumped off the Schell bridge. Some kids that was fishing found her caught on a snag sometime afterwards. And that was the way the authorities doped it out. She didn't have no relatives, nor nothing. But she had enough money to bury her. And the State got the rest.

“George's back got kind of tired, and he leaned back against the edge of the grave to rest himself. And be thought he seen something moving at a hole in a stonewall, low down. He

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was on the side of the cemetery where the snakes come from. But he didn't think nothin' of it.

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Just sort of wondered what it was. It took it about as long to pass that hole as it does for a C. V. freight to go by. But when the hole showed daylight again, George looked around to see where the engine was that was pulling the train. He saw it all right. George, down in the grave, with nothing much but his head sticking out, must a looked like a kind of rabbit to the snake — for that's what it was. And it was headed right for him. George said the snake was as big around as an eight inch tile. But he didn't stop to measure. No sir, fat as he is, he just floated up out of that grave, over the tombstones and over the fence. And, puffing and blowin' he run clear to center of town. He wouldn't even go back after his shovel. He see somethin' all right. But I don't know about it being as big around as an eight inch tile. They's some big snakes around there, though.

"I was mowing down in the medder back of there. You see there's the cemetery. Then they's this side hill where the snakes are, that's over the wall from the cemetery and slopes down to a swamp. And on the other side of the swamp was this medder where I was mowing. I felt a little jar on the machines and when I looked around I see somethin' floppin'. I stopped the horses, and looked. I see I had cut a snake in two with the mowing machine that was as big around as my arm — well mebbe not quite that big — big as my upper wrist, say. I had a stick in my hand for poking the grass off the mowing machine arm, so I went back to put the snake out of his mis'ry. But the part with the head on it wriggled away. I tried to catch it, but couldn't. "Cause it run 5 down a rabbit burrer and got away, leaving the tail part of him still floppin'. Judging by the tail, I should say that the snake was six feet long or mebbe seven — might a-been eight — and it was a kind of dull black color.

"Ever hear that a snake's skin was good for a headache? Next time you find a skin that a snake has sloughed off, and you have a headache, take it and wrap it around your

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forehead. I understand that's what they do in Europe when they have a headache. I guess now they must be short of snake skins; so many people in so many different countries have headaches. Maybe we could get up a reciprocal trade agreement and export snakeskins to 'em. I don't really believe that. I believe them Europeans will have to skin a few two-legged snakes they have walking around loose, before they really get rid of their headaches.

"No. I won't be seeing the King, so I can't give the idea of all English men wearing snake skins to him. My ancestors took too much trouble getting rid of his ancestors for me to want to meet him. Mebbe he just wants to be friendly. And maybe he's trying to pull our legs again. He might have saved the money the trip cost, and what the Canadian people put up, and all the rest of it, and have made a payment on the war debts. They ought ter have kept Eddie on the throne and let his wife be queen. If they'd a-done that, they'd a-been some excuse for the king to come over. For there would-a been an American queen. Who's this queen anyway? She was born in Glamis castle. She's Lady Macbeth — that's who she is. Bet yer she had a hand in getting Eddie framed up.

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Why should we cheer for her, stinging an American queen out of a job? Them damned English got a nerve. They wrote President Roosevelt and told him what to do in order to receive the king properly. Strikes me that the king is the one that's got to figure an the getting along. Not be telling the President what to do.

"You know that story about the 'getting along?' Well, it was in some war we had. A young feller just out of West Point got sent to a regiment that had a hard boiled colonel. The young feller was told it. But he was a diplomat, he was. Instead of keeping out of the colonel's way and doing what he was told, he goes right up and braces him. 'Colonel's he says, 'Lieut. So and so reports to you.' 'very good,' says the Colonel, 'report to Captain Blank H. Company.' 'Yes, sir,' says the shave tail, 'I've heard of you Colonel, and I'm sure

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we'll get along all right.' 'Get along, get along?' says the Colonel, 'you bet we'll get along. But in my outfit, young man, you'll do the getting along!'

"Say where was I? I was talking about snakes, and I seem to have got 'em mixed up with colonels.

"Lukas Schryba the Polack was telling the other day, 'All you folks is crazy in this country. You kill all da snake. Then you tax da people to get money to pay odder people to catch da boog.' He said that if we'd do like they do in the old country and fine people for killing snakes that the snakes would eat the bugs, and we wouldn't have to have so high taxes.

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"You don't have to believe this story, o'course. But I'm telling it to yer just as I heard it. I don't know nothin' about snakes — 'cept that I don't like 'em. But this Rattlesnake Pete that used to hunt rattlers around here told it to me. He ain't around here no more. He's gone West, where they's bigger rattlesnakes, I expect. But they got 'em 'round here that's big enough for me. Timber rattlesnakes they call 'em. And, instead of having a black head, like most timber rattlesnakes do, the ones around here has yeller heads. They got one that was five feet two inches long. Got him alive, too. And took it off to a zoo somewheres.

"The snakes that Rattlesnake Pete caught didn't get to no zoo. They got bought up by medicine men. You know, the kind that used to rig a gasolene flare up an a buggy. Play the banjos maybe, to get the folks around some evening. Tell 'em stories and sing. And then sell 'em rattlesnake oil for their rheumatiz. Maybe, some of 'em did sell real rattlesnake oil in them days. But I understand that the medicine business has advanced along with everything else. The medicine men travel in trailers now. And the oil they sell is this up to date motor oil that they advertise over the radio. 'Cept that the motor oil that in used for rattlesnake oil has been used a bit for automobile engines. But that don't hurt its medical properties none. I don't s'pose that they could get away with it unless they had a few live rattlers around for the folks to see so's to convince 'em it was the genuwine article.

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"Pete claimed he caught the rattlers with his bare hands. I don't know whether he did or not. I understand that the scientific fellers ⁸ who study 'em, or somethin', have a stick with a hole bored through it at one end. And through this hole they push a loop of string. The rattlers ain't lively, you know. They don't go nowheres and don't other bother nobody that don't bother them. So the scientific fellers can sneak up on a snake and put the loop of string over the snake's head. Then they pull on the ends of the string that they have in their hands. And the loop pulls the snake's head right up against the hole in the stick. They can put the snake in a box, or a bag then, and slack off on the string and get their stick out again ready for the next snake.

"They tell me that snakes have good eyesight near to. But that they can't hear a dumb thing. They feel a jar on the ground, though. And you have to step mighty light so's they won't feel you. But you can talk all you want. You won't scare the snakes none by talking.

"I asked one of the scientific fellers if he ever heard of a man catching a rattler with his bare hands. He laughed and said it had been done. And told me about a hobo who was lying on the ground up near Brattleboro sleeping off a jag. He felt somethin' crawling around him, woke up and saw a snake. He thought 't wan't nothin' but the effects of the licker he'd drunk, so he grabbed it and stuffed it in his pocket. The darned thing squirmed so that he couldn't sleep, so he got up, looked at it and see it was a real snake. He'd never seen none like it before. It was kinder dried up on the tail and whizzed it around so's it made a funny sound. He thought maybe he had a curiosity. So he stuffed it in a can and took it over to Bushnell's store where he ⁹ swapped it off for more licker. Bushnell kept it awhile as an exhibit. Then he pickled it in alcohol and sold it to some college. Jason Bushnell was the name. No, I didn't know they called him that 'cause he fleeced people. Maybe the scientific feller was funning me. But what he said sounded all right to me. He said anybody could handle a rattler with his bare hands — if the snake had just had a good, square meal. That when a rattler eats he empties his poison sacs and that it takes about three days to fill 'em up again. He said lots of people had been bitten by rattlers and

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hadn't been bothered much — only scared. But the reason was that the snake had had a good meal within three days, so's he couldn't squirt as much poison into 'em as he could if he'd been real hungry. But speaking about gettin' bit 'minds me of that story I was going to tell you about Rattlesnake Pete, that you don't have to believe unless you want to.

“Pete ketched all his rattlers with his bare hands. But one day he warn't quite quick enough, or sunthin', and a snake give him a good bite — right in the arm. Pete was scared. He just knowed he was going to die. He run screamin' for the doctor, taking the snake right along with him, 'cause he didn't want to lose his dollar bounty even if he was goin' to die — or maybe he thought he could pay the doctor with it. Anyway, that's the last the town seen of Rattlesnake Pete. The bite turned out to be fatal. Sure I did — I told you that Pete went West. No, the bite didn't hurt him enough to say so. Just scared him. Sure the bite was fatal. No, Pete didn't die. But the snake did that bit him. A bite of Pete was fatal to the snake.

“Good night. Guess after that one I'll be on my way home. Don't come to the door — I don't never treat you that way.”